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THE ART AMATEUR

DEVOTED TO THE CULTIVATION OF
ART IN THE HOUSEHOLD

A MONTHLY JOURNAL

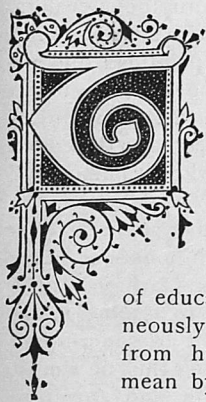
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RISE OF ART IN THE HOUSEHOLD.



DOMESTICATE art and make it a part of the household is one of the most strongly pronounced tendencies of our time. Without forgetting that art is the product of genius and genius a gift of nature, our time boldly proposes to give to all, by way of education, what nature gives spontaneously only to a very few, and to exclude from human life everything ugly and mean by a general development of the sense of beauty. Various agencies in modern life have led with necessity to this issue, and, however bold the proposition may seem, it now presents itself in a movement of progress which must be carried through to-day or to-morrow. The whole current of modern life is setting in that direction, and in making ourselves an organ for this tendency we feel with confidence that we are launching our boat on a broad stream.

In antiquity, art was a public affair, an affair of the state, and when finally, in the times of the Roman empire, it reached into the household, it partook so largely of the general decay of antique civilization, that its chief office soon became to administer to sensuality and effeminacy. In one field, however, in the field of decoration, it still produced marvelous results, but as a vehicle for moral development it played only a very doubtful rôle, and as a vehicle for intellectual development—the basis and principle of modern art—it was never understood. In the middle-ages art was a religious affair, an affair of the church. The cathedral was the architecture of those days; the Madonna their art of painting; the crucifix and the royal tombs their sculpture; the chants their music. Yea, the only drama which the middle-ages knew, was that performed in the church, by the priests, and for the purpose of religious instruction. As a moral agent this art, no doubt, stood much higher than that of antiquity, and it exercised also a much broader moral influence, but the highest point of intellectuality to which it ever reached was the mystical vision, the intuition of the trance, and when it was introduced in the household, it became the bearer of numberless superstitions, of which many various vestiges are still to be found among the peasants of southern Europe.

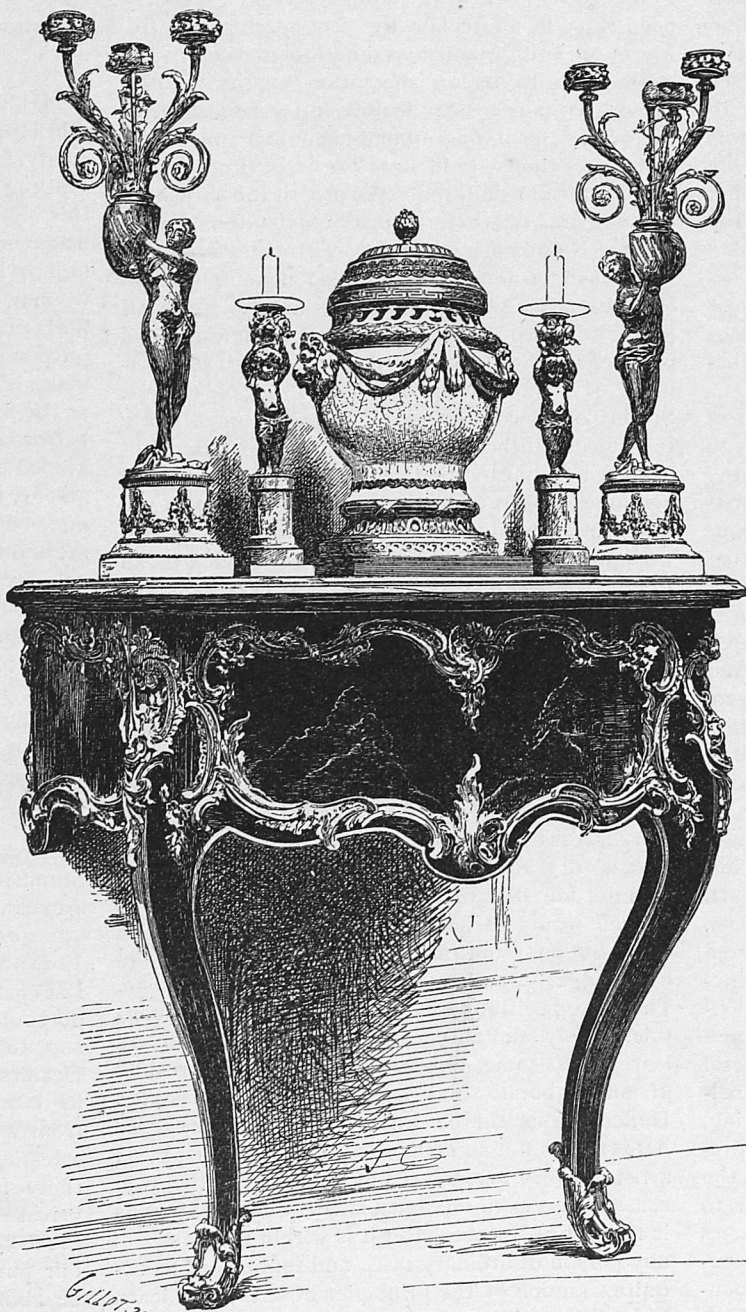
There was, however, some art in the middle-ages, or, at least, some beginnings of art, which did not belong to the church, but drew their inspirations immediately from the personal life of the individual

and aspired to none but a purely intellectual effect, and it is curious to notice how these germs of modern art, wherever they are found growing, always show themselves drawn towards the household as towards their sun. Perhaps the most remarkable instance of this kind of art is the minstrel. The minstrel's song was the first note of modern art sounded amid the sombre chants of the processions and the shrill yells of the tournaments, but easily distinguishable from both. Free, intellectual, addressing itself exclusively to the imagination, it never mixed in public life, but sought and found its home at the hearth. To the family living in the castle, with the draw-bridge always raised and the watchman always spying, the minstrel was, what true art always is to the household, a redeemer from that which is bad, a messenger of that which is good. When he arrived, the ladies descended into the hall, the carousal stopped, the armors were placed at rest along the walls, the dogs were turned out in the court-yard,

and, in the stillness of expectation, the song arose under the smoky vault, the song of love, the praise of beauty, the enthusiasm of adventurous exploits. The minstrel was the only representative of true art in the mediæval household, but he was also the most welcome guest who ever entered the castle. With the exception of the priest, he was the only stranger ever admitted to the apartments of the ladies, and how highly he was appreciated there, is shown by the costly embroidered curtains and tapestries which issued forth from those rooms, for it was the minstrel's songs rather than the exploits of the knights which were spread over the cloth. And later on, when the minstrel had been dead more than a century, and his songs were living on the lips of the villagers, it was the lady of the castle who, moved by some sad but sweet remembrance, undertook to gather them and write them down. The earliest and most valuable collection of popular ballads, the remnants of the departed minstrelsy, were almost invariably made by noble ladies and for their households.

The influence exercised by ladies on the formation of modern art has never been fully realized by art-historians. It was very great, and the medium through which it made itself felt was the household. It is true that all the ideas which prevailed during the period of the Renaissance and which formed the foundation of modern art, were furnished by a revival of the study of the classical literatures and by the fermentation which this study caused in the whole spiritual life of the middle-ages. But it is also true that the form which these ideas assumed and the application which they found, are due to a revolution which took place in social life at the same time and ended with the admission of ladies into society. Before this revolution, all social intercourse consisted in combats and carousals in which ladies could take no part. At social gatherings ladies were present only occasionally, and only as a kind of decoration for the pageant: at tournaments they gave the prize, but they were not the judges. Hardly, however, was the above revolution completed, before the ladies took the lead in social life and recast it by the aid of art.

Nothing was now deemed proper in which ladies could not partake, but under the sway of beauty everything received an artistic turn, just as under the sway of force everything had had an utilitarian purpose. It became, indeed, the chief task of art to administer to the demands of the new household, the household presided over by the ladies. The cathedral was left unfinished and the palace was built; scenes of domestic life were painted instead of the temptations of the saints; statues for the drawing-room, candelabra and chandeliers were carved instead of tombstones and monumental blazonry; and two



LACQUER CONSOLE TABLE, ORNAMENTED WITH CHASED COPPER (TIME OF LOUIS XV).
CHINESE CRACKLIN JAR AND CHIMNEY ORNAMENTS (TIME OF LOUIS XVI).
(SEE PAGE 9.)

entirely new elements, both of them children of a craving for beauty, made their first appearance in social life: conversation and fashion. In the Middle-Ages people spoke together, but they never conversed. That free exchange of ideas for the sole purpose of intellectual enjoyment, which is called conversation, was invented by the ladies of the Renaissance, and under their hands it became an art, as difficult as it is charming. Fashion had a similar origin and is, in all its caprices, nothing but a general submission to a new law of beauty, a transaction between art and the household, a compromise between taste and necessity.

Some grave mistake was made, however, when this close communion between art and the household was established by the Renaissance, for very soon the household lost its moral dignity and became artificial, and art lost its intellectual force and became flippant. It suffices to see the sleeping-room of Louis XIV., and read a description of the process by which he got out of the bed every morning, in order to understand that a mistake was made in the manner in which here art was employed in the household. There was art enough—for there was art in every corner. Yea, there was perhaps too much art, for life itself became an art, and many of its simplest utterances, such as the bow, the smile, etc., utterances whose worth principally depends upon their naturalness and spontaneity, became arts, exceedingly difficult to learn. But in all this redundancy of art, art itself was degraded by being made the mere framework for social life. What was the mistake? There is a difference between art as a creation of genius and art as the education of taste, and this difference was overlooked by the Renaissance. Art is first a representation of ideal conception, and it is a great mistake if anybody thinks himself an artist because he is much occupied with art as a matter of taste. When art is considered an expression of taste rather than an outburst of genius, it is lowered and soon it is killed. Also had the sixteenth century to retrace all the steps it had made in this false direction. In the beginning of the nineteenth century art was nearly banished from the household. Social life was drawn as near as possible to nature. Only that which was natural, or considered so, retained the power of charming. Every trace of art was avoided in dress, in manners, etc. The word "amateur" became a reproach on the lips of the Romantic school, and it was hardly possible to be a collector of art-objects without assuming the aspect of being a pedant.

What is it then which now, towards the close of the nineteenth century, once more calls art back to the household and demands a place for it there? Not the old mistake, that we are going to be artists all of us, that we want to make genius superfluous by doing its work ourselves, etc. On the contrary, there is just now a strong tendency abroad to separate all art, so far as it is the creation of genius, from the household proper and give it a place by itself in museums, galleries, etc. What is it, then? First it is the discovery of the great value art has as an educational instrument. As soon as the distinction between genius and taste was found and fixed, it became possible to teach children to play the clavichord without pretending to make them musicians, or to teach them to draw without pretending to make them painters. Before that time it had been impossible. Among people who know not that art, like electricity, has a positive and negative pole, genius and taste, all occupation with art is deemed pretentious, conceited, ridiculous. But the distinction once having been found out, any liking for art-occupations could be and was freely indulged, and the beneficial influence herefrom on the general education of the mind soon became an acknowledged fact. It is not possible, by lessons in drawing, to teach children to look at things with that appreciation of forms and colors which characterizes the born painter, but it is possible by this means to teach them to see all objects with a distinctness and precision which do not exist for the uneducated eye. It is not possible, by lessons in elocution, to teach children to read aloud a poem with that power of impression which characterizes the great actor, but it is possible by this means to teach

them to grasp everything they read with a clearness and definiteness which do not exist for the uneducated perception. This understood, and the general mental benefits accruing therefrom, all pedagogues agreed, even a generation ago, in wishing occupations with art introduced both in the school-room and on the play-ground. Next, during the last fifty years, one of the principal elements of domestic life, the so-called home-industry, has almost entirely disappeared. The invention of the steam engine, and the whole industrial and commercial developments based on this invention, have made nearly all branches of the old home-industry a mere waste. The poverty of the peasantry is in many regions directly caused by their stubborn adhesion to the old custom of making their clothes and utensils and implements themselves. But something must take the place of the occupation lost. Empty hands give empty hearts. The reason why Eve listened so willingly to the serpent was, no doubt, that she had nothing else to do. Now, having once risen from drudgery to home-industry, the household cannot go back to drudgery in order to get something to do; on the contrary, it must rise one step higher and fill the vacant place with something still nobler; it must move onwards from home-industry to art occupations; and it is in this great movement, from which an elegant household can emancipate itself, we beg leave to offer our assistance.

"ART is to be found in everything," says Prudhon, the great French critic, "art and idealism even in a photograph of raw butcher's meat, chopped in pieces." There is more truth in this than many of us may be inclined to admit at first. Doubtless there is a way of infusing artistic feeling into the most common occupations of everyday life; it should be the aim of all, from the painter to the shoemaker, to invest his work with æsthetic beauty. We have been slow to appreciate the fact in this country, where our utilitarianism as a nation of traders has made art with us an affectation by the wealthy rather than a necessary feature in the education of the masses, as it undoubtedly should be regarded. But better times are in store for us, or if not for us, at least for our children. We are on the threshold of a new era in æsthetic education—the Renaissance of the Nineteenth Century. Earnest efforts are being made toward a widespread development of art cultivation throughout the country. From all parts we have reports of "loan exhibitions" of paintings and articles of vertu, and of the establishment of organizations similar to our New York Society of Decorative Art. However imperfectly the objects of these enterprises may be carried out, it must be admitted that, even in failure, they give a stimulus to art education which is bound to tell upon the taste of the rising generation. The press, with its far-reaching influence, is doing what it can to help the good cause; but unfortunately its power in this direction is often much restricted by the lack of competent instructors. This is not surprising, however, for hitherto there has been no inducement for newspaper writers to qualify themselves specially for this field of labor, and the necessary qualifications do not come by intuition. Philip Gilbert Hamerton, the English writer, says truly that "there is no subject in the world of which the writer-of-all-work is less competent to treat than art." Art criticism is not the personal expression of like or dislike. It is not founded on fancies for which the author himself would be hardly able to account satisfactorily, but on sound æsthetic principles and technical knowledge. Art is not a mere matter of taste. There are positive tests which must be applied conscientiously, and these are not "little rules easily learned," as some persons may imagine, but results of an elaborate and deeply-seated philosophy. Hence, it should be understood that THE ART AMATEUR is not so rash as to undertake to make an artist of every reader. To be an artist in the true sense of the word one must have genius, and genius is the gift of Nature. But it is within the power of any person of ordinary taste and refinement to acquire so much of the principles of art as to learn in a little while to distinguish between what is æsthetically good and what is æsthetically bad, and in this it will be our aim to assist him. There are

certain primary tests as to fitness of form and color which one may soon learn to apply critically to objects of everyday life, and this agreeable and almost unconscious study will lead naturally and rapidly to higher planes of art knowledge.

KNOWING how desirable it often is for art collectors to receive disinterested counsel concerning the merits and actual value of intended purchases, we have determined to offer our services as Art Adviser to such as may need them, placing at the disposal of our clients the experience of our staff of experts who, under directions from this office, will be put into communication with those needing their assistance. For a moderate fee such advice will be given as will doubtless, in many cases, save collectors from being imposed upon by unscrupulous dealers. The markets just now are loaded with spurious bric-a-brac and forgeries of valuable paintings, and we think that it is high time that some stand was taken to expose the disgraceful traffic. All communications on this head should be addressed to the editor of THE ART AMATEUR and marked "personal;" they will be regarded as strictly confidential. In the same way we are willing to give advice to persons about to decorate and furnish houses or suites of apartments. It is at present the fashion for the architect who builds the house to assume, under one pretext or another, the right to superintend the furnishing of it. When he does this, he almost invariably makes the upholsterer and furniture dealer add heavily to their regular charges, so as to be able to allow him a fat commission. We hope that the time will soon arrive when house-builders will be able to dispense altogether with the expensive officiousness of the architect, who will be instructed to confine himself strictly to his own particular calling, which does hardly legitimately include that of a shaver of commissions. In the meantime, we tender our services to those desiring advice.

"He lies like the prospectus of a new magazine," said Horace Mann of some one notorious for mendacity. We have no idea of putting THE ART AMATEUR in the position of a possible illustration of this bold and, in the light of the excellence of the magazines of the day, we may add extravagant metaphor, by indulging in magnificent promises which we may find difficult to perform. The general contents of our initial number must speak as to our purposes. The only promise we shall venture to make is that our future numbers shall be as good as the present one, *at least*, and shall be as much better as the growing experience of the editor, guided by the suggestions of his readers, shall enable us to render them. The great point of difference between our proposed treatment of matters of art and their treatment by the professed art periodicals may be formulated thus: Our contemporaries generally assume in advance that the reader knows everything of the technicalities and the philosophy of the topics on which they treat. THE ART AMATEUR prefers to assume that the reader knows nothing of these things, and from that safe starting point it will endeavor to instruct them.

In this our first number of THE ART AMATEUR, we wish to announce our intention to wage uncompromising war against all art shams and dealers in art shams, without respect to persons. In earnest of our purpose, we invite attention to Mr. Frederic Voss's article on spurious bric-a-brac, to Mr. Gaston L. Feuardent's exposure of recent frauds in the sale of counterfeit coins, on page 12 of this number, and to Mr. F. G. Ireland's article on "Picture Dealers and Artists." We may add that we are in correspondence with a gentleman in Paris from whom we expect at an early date some interesting particulars concerning the prices paid there for trashy pictures, afterwards sold into private collections in this country as works of great cost and merit. To enable us to carry out our purpose in such a way that our motives may be above suspicion, we wish to say here that no courtesies in the form of advertisements or otherwise will in any way be allowed to influence our action.